Birgitta of Sweden and the voice of prophecy

Mulder-Bakker, Anneke B.

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Review
Reviewed Work(s): Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy by Claire L. Sahlin
Review by: Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker
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of the *lena,* fairly dripping with Ovid and Jean de Meun, practices in our presence no actual—I say nothing of figurative—*lenocinium.* But she is never without sinister potential.

There is a large bibliography, but selected according to uncertain principles. One of its major lacunae is Robert S. Haller, "The Old Whore and Mediaeval Thought: Variations on a Convention" (unpublished Princeton dissertation, 1960), from which the author would have done well to take instruction, especially on the question of the relationship between the *lena* and medieval misogynistic and antimatrimonial literature. Rouhi gives the important pseudo-Ovidian *De vetula* short shrift and seems to be aware only of the Robathan edition. She neglects the important cognate vernacular Ovidiana of *La Vieille* (ed. Hippolyte Cocheris, 1861) and *Les lamentations de Matheolus* (ed. A. G. van Hamel, 1905). The bibliography having to do with the *Roman de la Rose* and with Chaucer is particularly eccentric. For a Harvard Ph.D. to use the Modern Library edition of the *Canterbury Tales* as an authoritative base text would seem to approach treason.

There are some features of the book, such as its occasional gratuitous excursions into "theory," that others may find less distracting than I. For me a passage from Baudrillard's *De la séduction* (p. 11) that is merely largely incomprehensible in the original French actually achieves total unintelligibility in its English translation. And the book's brief "Conclusion: Towards a Theory of Seduction" rivals Freud's analysis of jokes in its achievement of rendering a topic of sparkling promise joyless and dreary. Though this book has several merits, the quality of its writing is not among them. It is replete with solecisms, lonely pronouns without antecedents, and dull passive constructions. The texture of the author's prose not infrequently approaches that of congealed oatmeal (e.g., "Physical love and sensuality have received considerable treatment in Persian and Arabic literature from standpoints that would strike the Western-centered reader as altogether more permissive, especially as regards detailed discussion of the topic, than medieval Christian standpoints on the issue," pp. 146–47). Finally, however, one must admire this book's ambition and learning; and though few academic medievalists can afford it, fewer still can afford to leave it unconsulted.

JOHN V. FLEMING, Princeton University

CLAIRE L. SAHLIN, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy.* (Studies in Medieval Mysticism, 3.) Woodbridge, Eng., and Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer, 2001. Pp. xvi, 266; 6 black-and-white figures. $90.

When Tore Nyberg wanted to mark the sixth centennial of Birgitta of Sweden's canonization with an international and interdisciplinary conference in 1991, it cost him a great deal of effort to assemble a substantial group of scholars. Birgitta (1302/3–1374), a national and revered saint of Sweden, was seemingly immune to a critical evaluation of her life and work. A dozen years later, she is the subject of countless articles; a journal, *Birgittiana;* and three related book-length studies of international caliber: a biography (by Bridget Morris), a work devoted mainly to Birgitta on the discernment of spirits (Rosalynn Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices*), and the study of Birgitta's gift of prophecy by Sahlin. Research in the areas of mysticism, women's spirituality, and gender has led to a discovery of Birgitta, and it is in this framework that Sahlin places her study.

Birgitta of Sweden, widowed mother of eight children and member of the Swedish high nobility, maintained ties with the ecclesiastical and secular leaders of her time. In the first chapter of her book Sahlin relates how dozens of her revelations have been preserved, written or dictated by Birgitta in Swedish and translated into Latin by her confessors, the last of whom, Alfonso of Jaén, compiled a seven-volume selection in Rome for the canonization proceedings. Later a number of visions excluded from that selection were pub-

lished in Sweden in the volume *Revelaciones extravagantes*. A few fragments in Swedish were probably written by Birgitta herself.

In chapter 2 Sahlin sketches Birgitta's development into a prophet of moral reform in Sweden and Rome and her self-identification as a second Mary. She cites Alfonso's description of Birgitta as the amanuensis of God who recorded every word exactly as it was dictated to her. The picture here is of an essentially passive and mechanical conduit of God. Sahlin also reports Alfonso's statements on Birgitta's harmonious collaboration and subservience—she never spoke out in public, always leaving this to her counselors. Quoting from the *Extravagantes,* however, Sahlin notes that Birgitta herself had a higher view of her role. God spoke to her: "sometimes you turn them [God's words] over and over again in your mind, sometimes you write and rewrite those things, until you come to the proper sense of my words" (p. 73). Birgitta never called herself a prophet, a label we owe to her confessors and clerical devotees. We might wonder whether they were engaged in some "remodeling" of her. Because Sahlin seeks mainly cross-cultural and sociological explanations for the phenomenon of prophecy, she does not pursue that line of questioning. There is no attempt to come closer to Birgitta herself by contrasting Alfonso's selection with the *Extravagantes*.

In chapter 3 Sahlin focuses on Birgitta's identification with Mary. Birgitta saw herself as the young Lady of the House who, together with her bridegroom Christ, took over the running of the spiritual household (the whole world) from the "old couple," God and Mary. In the *Sermo angelicus,* a series of revelations with liturgical readings about Mary, she described Mary as the teacher of the apostles, who revealed to them all that they did not know about her Son. A question Sahlin does not explore is the extent to which Birgitta derived from this a right to engage in public teaching herself. The final chapters present the responses of confessors as well as defenders and detractors of Birgitta's sanctity.

Sahlin focuses mainly—and with skill—on the official picture drawn by the church of a charismatically gifted woman of the late Middle Ages and on the ecclesiastical procedures developed to assess female prophecies. Her study is based on a thorough knowledge of the Latin sources and the Swedish and English secondary literature. It is outstandingly documented with footnotes, a bibliography, and an index.

ANNEKE B. MULDER-BAKKER, University of Groningen

SARAH SALIH, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England.* Woodbridge, Eng., and Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer, 2001. Pp. ix, 278. $75.

The subject of virginity engaged thinkers from antiquity through the Middle Ages. Few left a more complex legacy than St. Paul whose classification of virgins, the unmarried woman who chooses virginity versus the married woman, that is, the woman who "cogitat quae Domini sunt" versus the woman who "cogitat quae sunt mundi, quomodo placeat viro," became a bountiful crux that spawned more questions than answers. How were unmarried women who were not active sexually different from the Pauline virgin? Did the role of virgin require some symbolic public expression? Were virgins to dress differently? Was virginity to be restricted to the sexually continent? Is the role of virgin more appropriate to females? What was the relative sanctity of the virgin? If virginity was not restricted to the continent, could the married achieve it by grace and will?

Despite his own status, Paul understood virginity chiefly as a female vocation. While later commentators saw it as possible for both sexes, most viewed women as the primary agents. Virginity led to personal transformation. Jerome says that when a woman becomes a religious virgin she takes on a new gender identity, becoming a man: "mulier esse cessabit, et dicetur vir." Aside from the misogyny of this remark, it may suggest that for the virgin,